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Underground Paper Features Sex and Culture

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One editor used to work in a brokerage house; another wears a toupee and sells insurance; they keep a stack of Playboy magazines on an office desk, and a sign on the wall instructs the staff to "Find an Ash Tray and Use It."

But the Quicksilver Times, Washington's new underground radical newspaper, has survived its identity crisis. Only seven issues old, it already is making money.

The money part is important. The paper's quick commercial success is a tribute to the cash value of radical sex, politics and culture in a "straight" city eager for novelty.

"It's mostly straight people who buy the newspapers," confides Terry Becker, long-haired cofounder of Quicksilver Times and one of its 11 editors. "We sell to Georgetown shoppers and tourists, people who come to Georgetown to drink."

"Very few kids buy the paper in comparison to people in suits and ties and dresses," he says.

Three times a month, 12,000 to 15,000 copies of the newspaper are printed in New York and distributed here from the paper's tidy office at 1932 17th St. NW.

For 25 cents, the Georgetown shoppers, tourists and drinkers get 24 to 28 pages of local muckraking and exposes, the nationally syndicated column of black comedian Dick Gregory, theoretical treatises on the coming New Left revolution and sex ads.

"A lot of the men over 35 buy it for the ads, which is really sad," says staff member Peggy O'Callaghan, Quicksilver's lone female editor.

The man who stands to profit most from the paper's success is cofounder Steven Guss, 27, a local rock show promoter, insurance salesman and budding entrepreneur

of the left. A Washington native, he is the oldest member of the staff. He has a law degree from George Washington University.

Like most of Quicksilver's editors and writers, Guss once worked for the rival Washington Free Press, but he quit as that paper's advertising manager after difficulties with fellow workers. At the Quicksilver Times he is now earning a 25 per cent commission on every advertisement he sells.

"Nobody else can bring us in our ads," says a Quicksilver editor. "He's dynamite."

The prematurely balding Guss (he wears his toupee, friends explain, mostly for special, social or business engagements) is a man of indefinable ideology who has happily discovered that radicalism is a saleable product.

"I'm not a Marxist-Leninist," he says. "I'm not anti-capitalist. I think I'm anti corporate capitalism. I'm talking about these monster corporations, like GM and CBS."

Ads at \$300 a Page

Neither advertises in the Quicksilver Times or is likely to. Several large record companies, however, do. At \$300 per full-page ad, \$4.24 per column inch, they and other Quicksilver advertisers inform all those Georgetown habitués what records the hip young radical set likes to listen to, what clothes it likes to wear, what plays and movies it likes to watch.

It is up to the editors to tell the world what hip young radicals think. Inevitably, as on some "straight" newspapers, tensions between the editorial and advertising arms of the journal do exist, but so far they have not been extreme at the Quicksilver Times.

The topic of drugs is the center of one minor intramural controversy. Three members of the staff face sentencing this month as a result of pleading guilty to charges of possession of marijuana earlier in the year. Among them is Donald Perry, who had just completed his second week with a brokerage house here when he was "busted."

Shuns Use of Drugs

Guss, however, disapproves of drug use. "I'm not into drugs at all," he says. But, he quickly adds "this is just me. I'm not going to tell anyone on the staff or outside how to run their lives."

Thus apparently he did not object when a recent issue of the Quicksilver Times ran a detailed, step by step description of how to synthesize mescaline, a potent psychedelic drug.

Nonetheless, says Perry, "we're definitely opposed to a hippie subculture dropout society. A dropout society definitely does not bring about change."

The kind of change that Quicksilver espouses is sometimes difficult to determine. Every article, in effect, is an editorial, and many are not written by the staff.

"If it's well-written," explains Guss, "we'll print anything."

That kind of editorial eclecticism on occasion makes for lively reading. Among recent features there appeared a three-part series by the Institute of Policy Studies' Arthur Waskow on community control of police, and an extended interview with Karl Hess, a former aide to Sen. Barry Goldwater (R-Ariz.) who recently joined ranks with the New Left.

Sharpest reader reaction so far has come in response to a piece called "Know Your Neighbor," published in the paper's latest issue. It listed the names and addresses of several score alleged employees of the CIA. One reader has since suggested, in a letter to the editor, that the staff go to Russia to investigate the KGB. It was not a friendly letter.

Such journalistic coups as the CIA piece aside, Quicksilver has not yet fully defined its editorial image. Editors are careful to establish that they are not trying to compete with the older and larger (circulation: 20,000 plus) Washington Free Press, which is pitched to a

somewhat younger readership. But their hopes for Quicksilver's future still seem vague.

Policy Against Obscenity

"We're trying to reach people who are interested in the radical media but are turned off by the Free Press' obscenity," says Don Perry. Yet easily the most prominent feature in the last issue was a full-page cartoon strip about President Nixon that possibly could justify many readers' definition of obscenity.

In another attempt at definition, co-founder Guss outlines plans for "a paper about as relevant to the Washington area as the Village Voice is to New York."

"But," he adds, "we don't want to be just another part of the liberal or ultraliberal wing of the Democratic Party. We want this to be a radical newspaper."

Eventually, Guss hopes, an ever more-prosperous Quicksilver will branch out into radio and television broadcasting and open its own book store. Meanwhile he and Perry talk of publishing 64-page editions (the thickest so far was 28), distributing through a major local food chain, publishing 60,000 newspapers a week, converting into a nonprofit foundation, and sponsoring rock concerts in the city's streets.

Not everyone on the staff, however, is enchanted by all this potential grandeur. "Everyone on this paper is radical to a degree," explains Peggy O'Callaghan, "but some are more radical than others."

"Some of us are worried that, in a small way, we imitate exactly what we're fighting."